

Digital Divide - Closing the Gap

i What is the Digital Divide?

- It appears that the term originated as more researchers became convinced that an individual's economic and social well being increasingly depended on his/her ability to access, accumulate, and assimilate information. While a standard telephone line can be an individual's pathway to the riches of the information age, a personal computer, modem and affordable and reliable access to the Internet are rapidly becoming the keys to the vault.
- In essence, information "have-nots" are disproportionately found in this country's rural areas and its central cities.
- Our untapped potential isn't only among those currently unemployed. Workers now on the job need access to the high-tech skills that can make or break career success in our digital-age economy.
- Even if a community does not boast a Microsoft or America On-Line, it's likely that some employers, even smaller ones, are facing serious skill shortages that organizations can help to address.
- There couldn't be a better time to make these investments. With the soundest economy in a generation (low unemployment, rising productivity, controlled inflation), NOW is the time to invest in America's untapped labor potential.

i What is the size of the computer world now?

- Three years ago, there were 200 million computers in the world. Three years from now (by 2003) it is estimated that there should be more than 500 million.
- In 1995 8% of North Americans (U.S. and Canada) were wired to the Internet. Today more than 50% are wired.

i Does race or ethnic origin still play a significant role in a household's access to computers and the Internet?

- Whites are more likely to have access to the Internet from home than Blacks or Hispanics have from any location.
- Black and Hispanic households are approximately one-third as likely to have home Internet access as households of Asian/Pacific Islander descent, and roughly two-fifths as likely as White households.

- The gaps between White and Hispanic households, and between White and Black households, are now approximately five percentage points larger than they were in 1997.

i Are Americans living in rural areas lagging behind the national average in computer and Internet access, regardless of income level?

- At almost every income level, those households in rural areas are less likely to own computers than households in urban or central city areas. At every income level, households in rural areas are significantly less likely – sometimes half as likely -- to have home Internet access than those in urban or central city areas.
- Black households in rural areas are 1/3 less likely to own a computer than the average Black household, and are 2/5 less likely to access the Internet than the average Black household.
- For rural areas, the Kindergarten-12th grade school is a popular point of Internet access: 30.0% of rural persons use the school for Internet access outside the home, compared to a national average of 21.8%

i Does education and income level impact the digital divide?

- Between 1997 and 1998, the divide between those at the highest and lowest education levels increased 25 percent.
- As of the fall of 1998, 39% of classrooms of poor schools were connected to the Internet, as compared to 74% in wealthier schools.
- The digital divide is not only about reaching the “disconnected” but reaching the teachers who will instruct the “disconnected.

i What actions are under way to attack the digital divide problem?

- The president, with Secretary Herman, announced several initiatives to bring “digital opportunity” to all Americans. The Administration has launched a series of public/private sector initiatives to provide Internet functionality at community access centers such as schools, libraries and other public access facilities.
- Companies have donated computers and software to neighborhood centers in support of this access effort.
- Over 400 Companies and non-profits have committed to bring “digital opportunity to youth, families and communities.

i What is DOL doing to bridge this divide? A number of things.

- DOL realized that simple access to information was not enough. There is simply too much information and it is offered in confusing and disorganized venues. Access, simplicity, and ease of use are all important in presenting Internet information.
- Over the past several years, DOL has been packaging and presenting critical useful information for access over the Internet. To cite two examples:
 - < America's Career Kit packages and presents millions of pieces of information about careers, jobs, job searching, education, and training in a single web site.
 - < Together with NPR, DOL developed *workers.gov*, a web site for the American worker where information is presented in a clear format on topics including jobs, learning, family, health, protections, etc.
- The Workforce Investment Act of 1998 is a bipartisan effort to provide a fundamentally new framework for a workforce preparation and employment system designed to meet the needs of employers and job seekers. This Act gives new responsibilities to States and local communities to design and manage training and employment programs at the local levels – where customer needs are best understood. Local communities are empowered to steer the federal dollars to training where it is most needed, in the development of skills most in demand, such as IT jobs. Last year Congress appropriated over \$5.4 billion to support WIA programs.
- On September 5, a Solicitation for Grant Applications (SGA) was published in the Federal Register announcing that \$2.3 million is available to support projects in strategic planning and strategic research that engage local stakeholders in taking a broad look at the needs of their community and the character and direction of their regional economy.
- These community audits bring together information on economic and labor market trends to support both strategic planning and WIA program operations. Such an audit is fundamentally a strategic planning effort that involves all the relevant stakeholders in a defined area. Through community audits, local leadership can assess what new skills may be in demand in growth sectors of the local economy and where a decline in demand for certain skills may signal future layoffs.
- This project is multi-phase, beginning with research into various approaches, with the ultimate goal of system wide improvement in local “auditing” operations. The initial phase seeks to engage expert practitioners from around the country to develop a better understanding of the approaches to strategic community planning. Later phases will include training, targeted technical assistance, and dissemination of effective practices. A “learning network” of interested practitioners is also under consideration.

- 1998's American Competitiveness & Workforce Improvement Act provides that a major portion of the \$500 application fee companies pay for H-1B non-immigrant visas be ploughed back into training American workers in targeted, high-skill industries.
 - < H-1B is a specialty temporary work visa which is the principal mechanism through which highly skilled workers and professionals enter the United States. The visa provides a six-year work authorization for persons who are admitted with the understanding that they may intend to stay and, in fact, the majority of H-1Bs desire to adjust to permanent resident status (otherwise known as a green card).
 - < The purpose of these skill training projects is to prepare American workers to fill these good jobs.
 - < A little over 56 percent of the revenues are reserved for the Secretary of Labor to provide grants for technical skills training to local Workforce Investment Boards (or regional consortia of boards with a common interest) that will carry out such programs or projects through One-Stop delivery systems.
 - < Beginning August 16 of last year, ETA has been conducting competitive solicitations which have invited local Boards to apply for these grants.
 - The first round offered grants up to a maximum of \$1.5 million for two years.
 - The second round offered grants up to \$3 million.
 - On August 1, the Department of Labor announced a solicitation for a third round of demonstration grants under the H-1B program, offering more than \$40 million in additional funds.
 - < In total this year, the Labor Department will invest more than \$80 million in high-tech skills training through this one program alone.
- A Targeted Skills Shortage Partnership Building and Training Strategies Demonstration Program aimed specifically at minority institutions.
 - < This program is designed to prepare and support minority colleges and universities in their role as workforce development partners in the development of training strategies to respond to employers' identified skills shortages.

- < In addition to the development of partnership grant applications, grant opportunities also are available under this solicitation to provide training in response to employer-identified skill shortages.
- < Applicants under this solicitation only are minority colleges and universities (MCUs). Other organizations including Workforce Investment Boards and employer associations may initiate partnerships with MCUs to develop grant applications.
- < These grants are focused on Minority Colleges and Universities or MCUs – Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges. Just as Workforce Investment Boards are the sole applicants eligible to apply for the H1B grants, MCUs are the only applicants eligible for the Targeted grants.
- < This program is designed to help ensure folks who are generally underrepresented in high skill and high technology occupations are able to join these growing occupational areas.
- < We're doing this to encourage institutions to expand their involvement in training activities that may not always lead to degrees. Much of what is lacking in some institutions of higher education is the ability to provide just-in-time training to meet specific skill shortages as quickly as possible. It is designed to help connect institutions with folks who need skill upgrading to remain competitive in today's job market.
- < This program will also provide institutions with the resources and credentials to work employers, workforce boards, unions and other key stakeholders to strengthen local economies and help communities provide good jobs for their citizens.
- In these and other programs, DOL is partnering with business, labor and community leaders to connect prepared workers and employers to continue to strengthen and expand our 21st Century prosperity. We're committed to leaving no one behind.